The weather was nearly ideal during peak pheasant hatch this year, which could mean good things for hunters chasing ring-necked roosters in North Dakota this fall.

CRAIG BIHRLE

RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

Stan Kohn, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Bismarck

The more quality habitat on the landscape, the more upland game bird species respond. This is especially true with ring-necked pheasants, which have shown some major population increases since 1988, shortly after CRP was introduced in North Dakota.

In October 1988, North Dakota was in a major drought, yet pheasant numbers were touted as still pretty good. That fall, with a two-bird daily limit, more than 40,000 hunters shot nearly 120,000 birds.

CRP really took off in the early 1990s and pheasants responded. Today, North Dakota has a three-bird daily limit, and about 100,000 hunters are shooting 800,000-plus pheasants annually.

While hunters today are enjoying pheasant numbers like most have never seen, all good things usually come to an end. With a reduction of CRP on the landscape, we will surely see negative changes in our pheasant population. But at this time, things look promising for another good pheasant season.

The 2008 spring crowing count survey showed a 36 percent increase in breeding birds throughout most of the traditional pheasant range. Though conditions remain dry in much of southwestern and southeastern North Dakota, there was some green-up in pastures in spring, likely providing better nesting cover, though residual cover was in short supply in many areas.

Except for some rain and cooler temperatures in early June, weather conditions were almost perfect during peak pheasant hatch. Many young pheasant broods were observed in early summer, which is a good sign. We'll know more after summer roadside counts are completed in late August.

RON WILSON

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Aaron Robinson, Upland Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

Prior to the pheasant explosion, sharp-tailed grouse were the upland bird of choice for many North Dakota hunters. In 1976, grouse harvest hit a near record high of 190,000 birds.

The loss of native prairie to farming due to high commodity prices and world shortages over the next decade resulted in a near record low harvest of 75,080 birds in 1988. The bag limit was two birds with a possession of four.

In 1991, after CRP had a few years to establish, North Dakota had a record harvest of nearly 200,000 birds. CRP has provided a boost to sharptails throughout the state, especially in areas with fewer acres of native grasslands.

While native grasslands continue to provide habitat in much of southwestern North Dakota, the central, southern and northern parts of the state now have good numbers of birds thanks to CRP. But that is probably going to change in the next couple of years. As CRP acres decline, so likely will sharptail numbers.

The 2008 breeding population showed another slight increase in all districts this spring. On the surface, this sets the stage for potentially producing a good number of young birds. Several mild winters have contributed to good winter survival. Initially, habitat conditions in spring were certainly dryer than previous years, but conditions hopefully improved enough in many parts of the state to boost production.

RON WILSON

Ruffed grouse are often hard to come by in North Dakota's northern tier. The hunter and his dog may spend an entire weekend in the woods and flush only a handful of birds.

SAGE GROUSE

Aaron Robinson

Sage grouse were on the landscape long before the Lewis and Clark voyage, and currently are a species of concern throughout the West. They rely on sagebrush to persist, much like pheasants rely on CRP to sustain high populations.

Sage grouse habitat has decreased up to 50 percent in Western states. North Dakota has a small population located in the southwest, which has supported an annual hunting season. In 2008, for the first time in nearly a half-century, the sage grouse season will not be open.

The decision to close the season was based on the 2008 spring sage grouse survey count, which totaled 77 males on 18 active strutting grounds. Things have changed considerably in the last 20 years. In 1988, the population was more than triple what it is today. The decline is in part due to habitat loss, but recently West Nile virus has been identified as a major threat.

RUFFED GROUSE

Stan Kohn

From grasslands to native woodlands, the connection is still habitat, even though CRP doesn't directly affect ruffed grouse. But the amount and quality of native woodlands in Rolette, Bottineau, Pembina, Walsh, Cavalier and portions of McHenry counties surely do.

Forty years of census data in North Dakota indicate ruffed grouse numbers cycle about every 8-10 years. To look back at the ruffed grouse population in 1988 is to see how very little has changed in the hunting structure for this woodland bird. The one exception is the amount of native woodlands available in 1988 compared to today, as our native forest habitat continues to decrease. Hunting season dates, bag limits, number of hunters and harvest has remained fairly constant over the last 20 years.

Ruffed grouse populations in 1988 were just coming out of a low. Currently, we are also slowly moving up from a low in the population cycle. Even though hunter numbers and harvest have been low since 2004, there is still a group of dedicated woodland hunters who enjoy pursuing ruffed grouse no matter how many hours they have to walk before a flush.

Spring 2008 census information was not available when *North Dakota OUTDOORS* went to press. Recently, however, there have been both positive and negative indicators that the population is struggling to improve. Drumming count surveys in spring 2005 showed the number of displaying males increased about 37 percent from 2004, and the 2006 count found drums up 27 percent from 2005. But the 2007 drumming survey found the number of drums dropping considerably again. The hope is that the 2008 count shows some upward improvement.

As with all species, habitat is vital. A good mixture of young and old aspen trees, with a thick shrub understory of beaked hazel, will improve nesting success and brood survival.

For the best ruffed grouse hunting in North Dakota, hunters should concentrate on the Turtle Mountains in Bottineau and Rolette counties and the Pembina Hills area of Cavalier and Pembina counties.

PRAIRIE CHICKENS

Aaron Robinson

North Dakota saw its prairie chicken population increase enough to hold its first hunting season in nearly 60 years in 2004. The population has remained fairly stable the last few years, but for the first time in four years, spring 2008 counts indicated a decline in bird numbers.

The North Unit, namely in eastern Grand Forks County, showed a 2 percent decline, and the South Unit in southeastern North Dakota indicated an 18 percent decline.

However, the potential for decent prairie chicken production is promising in both units. Even so, it's too early to make any fall predictions. Fifty permits are available in each unit again this year. Successful applicants will be able to take two prairie chickens and a daily limit of three sharp-tailed grouse.

HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

Aaron Robinson

The 1980s were the good old days in North Dakota for Hungarian partridge. In 1988, hunters had a five-bird bag limit and it was not unusual to flush five or six coveys per day. It got even better through 1992, and then numbers plummeted following the cool, wet summer of 1993, and have not returned to those levels since.

Partridge are a peculiar bird. They thrive in drought and are not tied to CRP, yet they need edge cover to survive. With the right conditions, populations can rebound in a few short years. That said, don't expect to see an abundance of birds this fall.

Spring conditions this year have been mild, with the potential for producing good hatching conditions, but last fall's harvest showed no improvement in the partridge age ratio – 2.76 immature birds per adult, compared to 3.59 in 2006. This indicates that production last season was poor, most likely due to heavy spring rains. Also, rural mail carrier surveys indicated a 15 percent decrease in partridge seen this spring. Production is not yet known, but if hunters are persistent, and scout out areas, they'll still find places with good bird numbers.

WILD TURKEYS

Stan Kohn

Turkeys are not directly tied to CRP, but can use these grasslands for brooding and feeding. This added cover was not available 20 years ago when North Dakota's fall turkey season was in its infancy. Except for a small hunting unit in Ransom and Richland counties, fall turkey hunting was restricted to southwestern North Dakota.

Two decades ago, the Game and Fish Department issued about 2,500 turkey licenses annually. The number of hunters hovered around 2,000 and harvest was below 2,000 birds, even though hunter success was quite good at nearly 70 percent. This fall, the Department will issue 8,700 licenses and, except for two hunting units, the entire state will be open to hunting.

In fall 2007, 8,313 hunters (four times more than in 1987) harvested 6,149 turkeys (three times more than 1987).

CRAIG BIHRLE

Nonnative wild turkeys have adapted to life in North Dakota after being introduced more than a half-century ago. Today, hunters can pursue these big birds in spring and fall.

Hunter success was 59 percent. Though reduction in CRP will not have the same affect on turkeys as pheasants, habitat is still the key, and any reduction will negatively influence birds.

Extensive spring rains in 2007 did improve turkey brood cover and provided a good insect hatch for chicks. This carry-over cover was beneficial to nesting hens in 2008, and weather in June was helpful for hatching and brooding chicks. Late summer brood surveys will provide an indication of brood and chick survival.

Last fall, good turkey numbers were found in the western, north central and southeastern parts of the state. It's anticipated these areas will again have good turkey numbers in fall.

DOVES

Mike Szymanski, Migratory Game Bird Biologist, Bismarck

Mourning dove hunting has had few changes since 1988. We are still allowed 60 days, starting no earlier than September 1, and hunters can still harvest 15 doves per day with 30 in possession. One minor change is the use of nontoxic shot for all hunting on federal waterfowl production areas.

Nearly twice as many people hunted doves in North Dakota back in 1988 (about 12,000 versus about 7,000 in recent years). Dove harvest in North Dakota has experienced a similar decline, and in recent years has been around 50,000-80,000 birds.

Reasons for a consistent long-term decline in dove hunter numbers are uncertain. North Dakota has always had relatively good numbers of doves during the first week of the season, mostly due to its large breeding population. It could be that hunters nowadays choose to wait and pursue other abundant game species that would otherwise have lower populations and fewer hunting opportunities without CRP. It may also be that kids are busy with after-school activities, or that urbanization has taken people farther away from a quick dove hunt – the hypotheses are endless.

North Dakota dove hunters should expect good opportunities again early this fall as long as we avoid really cool nights in late August. The state ranks second in the nation this year in the annual mourning dove population index after a 23 percent increase over last year's count. Hunters in the western two-thirds of the state should have pretty good hunting conditions over watering holes, if they can find them, as dry conditions should concentrate birds.

Eurasian collared doves, which are included with white-winged doves in the daily bag limit of 15 birds, continue to spread across the state. These birds had barely spread across Florida in 1988 after escaping from a local breeder in the Bahamas in the mid-1970s. They are now found all across the United States and into Canada.

Eurasian collared doves are about half-again the size of mourning doves and lighter colored with a squared-off tail. They also have a thin black neck collar. White-winged doves are slightly larger than mourning doves, have large white patches on their wings, and a squared-off tail. These birds are not native to North Dakota, but have been increasing in abundance in recent years.

Some dove hunters may be contacted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to participate in a wing survey. Hunters will be asked to clip one wing from each dove they shoot early in the season. The FWS will provide postage-free envelopes to mail the wings.

Hunters are also reminded to look for banded mourning doves in their bag and report bands directly to the FWS bird banding laboratory at 800-327-2263, or online at: www.reportband.gov.

Dove hunters must HIP register before hunting by calling 888-634-4798.

SANDHILL CRANES

Mike Szymanski

Sandhill crane hunting season frameworks have been stable since 2001, but are quite a bit different than those of 1988. Since inception of North Dakota's sandhill crane hunting season in 1968, season frameworks have changed many times, especially season dates and areas open in the state.

In 1988, only the central portion of the state was open to hunting, and it was split into two units. Since 2001, crane hunting has been open statewide. The western unit (west of U.S. Highway 281) is open for 58 days with a daily bag limit of three birds. The eastern unit (east of U.S. Highway 281) is open for 37 days with a daily bag limit of two. Since 1989, nontoxic shot has been required statewide for sandhill crane hunting.

North Dakota's harvest from the Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population (about 4,000 birds) isn't much different than it was in 1988. However, it did peak in 1998 at about 8,000 birds. Reasons for this harvest trend are not clear since the number of crane hunters in North Dakota has steadily increased since 1988 from about 1,800 to about 3,200. It could be that the increase in crane hunters is related to increased numbers of nonresident migratory game bird hunters in the state. Nonresident hunters now comprise more than two-thirds of all crane hunters.

Something that has changed in recent years is the distribution of sandhill cranes in North Dakota. Traditional staging areas, such as Horsehead Lake and Long Lake National Wildlife Refuge, have not held as many cranes as in the past.

This could be due to the lack of agricultural food resources available
to the birds. Many sandhill cranes now stage in other regions with greater food resources.

The other part of the staging area equation is that 1988 was a very dry time for North Dakota wetlands. The state has since experienced an unprecedented wet period and many key crane staging areas that were once shallow and surrounded by mudflats, grew into large, deeper marshes or even lakes supporting fish. With recent drought conditions, however, those former staging areas may again become highly attractive to migrating birds.

The Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population has been relatively stable since 1988. The spring population index has been around 400,000 birds. The 2008 spring index may well be a record count exceeding 500,000 birds. While the fall flight outlook is good this year, hunting opportunities in western North Dakota may be limited if extremely dry conditions persist.